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Democracy

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Abstract

After surveying the range of historical and contemporary meanings of democracy, this article surveys briefly the past and present contributions of Protestant ideas of human nature, social order, and rule of law to the development of modern democratic theory and law.

Keywords: democracy, Protestantism, election, covenant, sinner and saint, social order, church and state, constitution

At its core, democracy means “rule” (kratein) by the “people” (demos). More fully conceived, democracy is a blend of distinct social, political, and legal ideas and institutions. Democracy embraces the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, pluralism, toleration, and privacy. It insists on a limited government that is accessible and accountable to the people. It typically features a constitution and a charter of civil and political freedoms, a system of popular representation and political checks and balances, a guarantee of procedural rights in civil and criminal cases, and a commitment to majoritarian rule and minority protection, to regular popular political elections, to state-sponsored education and social welfare programs, to protection and promotion of private property and market economies, among others. Democracy, however, has no paradigmatic form. The four dozen national democracies around the world today have cast these basic ideas and institutions into widely variant forms.

Democratic ideas and institutions have an ancient pedigree. Classical Greek and Roman writers, notably Aristotle and Cicero, described democracy, alongside monarchy and aristocracy, and these discussions were echoed and elaborated by dozens of medieval and early modern Catholic writers. Small communities like the Greek polis, the medieval cloister, and the colonial township practiced various forms of direct democracy. Legal documents from the Edict of Milan (313) to the Magna Carta (1215) to the Petition of Right (1628) spoke of liberties, rights, privileges, and religious toleration. Prior to the seventeenth century, however, these instances of democracy remained incidental and isolated. Monarchical and aristocratic theories and forms of

government dominated the Western state and church. Democracy emerged as a formal theory and form of civil government and social organization only in early modern times.

Protestantism helped to shape the modern rise of democracy. While none of the leading Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century taught democracy per se, their theology was filled with democratic implications. Following Martin Luther and John Calvin, many early Protestants taught that a person is at once saint and sinner. On the other hand, each person is created in the image of God and has equal access to God. Each person is called by God to a distinct vocation, which stands equal in dignity to all others. Each is a prophet, priest and king and responsible to exhort, minister, and rule in the community. Each is thus vested with a natural liberty to live, to believe, to serve God and neighbor. Each is entitled to the vernacular Scripture, to education, to work in a vocation. On the other hand, all persons are inherently sinful. They need the restraint of the moral and civil law to deter them from vice and drive them to virtue. They need the association of others to exhort, minister, and rule them with law and with love. Persons are thus by nature communal creatures and belong to families, churches, schools, and other associations. Such associations, which are ordained by God and instituted by human covenants, are essential for the individual to flourish and for the state to function.

In the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, various Protestant groups in Europe began to derive democratic theory from this early Protestant theology. The Protestant theology of the person was cast into democratic social theory. Because all persons stand equal before God, they must stand equal before God's political agents in the state. Because God has vested all persons with natural liberties of life and belief, the state must assure them of similar civil liberties. Because God has called all persons to be prophets, priests, and kings, the state must protect their freedoms to speak, to worship, and to rule in the community. Because God has created people as social creatures, the state must promote and protect a plurality of social institutions, particularly the church, the school, and the family. The Protestant theology of covenants was cast into democratic constitutional theory. Societies and states must be created by voluntary written covenants, compacts, or constitutions, to which parties swear their mutual allegiance before God and each other in the form of oaths. These founding documents describe the community's ideals and values, delineate the citizen's rights and responsibilities, and define the officials' powers and prerogatives. The Protestant theology of sin was cast into democratic political theory. The political office must be protected against the inherent sinfulness of the political official. Power must be distributed among self-checking executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Officials must be elected to limited terms of office. Laws must be clearly codified, and discretion and equity closely guarded. If officials abuse their office, they must be disobeyed; if they persist in their abuse, they must be removed, even if by force of arms.

These Protestant democratic ideas were among the driving ideological forces of the revolts of the French Huguenots, Dutch pietists, and Scottish Presbyterians against their monarchical oppressors in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They inspired Anglo-Puritans in the English civil wars of 1640-1688 that truncated royal

prerogatives, augmented parliamentary power and popular representation, and ultimately yielded the famous 1689 Bill of Rights and Toleration Act and their many eighteenth-century constitutional progeny. These ideas remained a perennial source of inspiration and instruction for various neo-Lutheran and neo-Calvinist political movements in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They also had a modest place, alongside more dominant Catholic views, in the establishment of the Christian Democracy Party at the end of the nineteenth century.

These Protestant democratic ideas also helped to inspire the creation of several democratic church polities in Europe and America. Anabaptist churches, notably the Amish and Mennonites, separated themselves from secular society into small democratic communities, which featured popular election of church officers, public participation in church governance, and intensely egalitarian organizations and activities. Calvinist churches were often created as democratic polities. Church congregations were formed by ecclesiastical constitutions. Church power was separated among pastors, elders, and deacons, each of whom was elected to a limited term of office and held a measure of authority over the others. Church law was codified and administered through a variety of public or representative bodies. Church members convened periodic popular meetings to assess the performance of church officers and to deliberate changes in doctrine, liturgy, or government.

Puritan writers in New England drew ready political lessons from this democratic understanding of the church, and these lessons were reflected in several of the new American state constitutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Methodists, Baptists, and various other smaller religious groups born of the First and Second Great Awakening in America eventually made democratization a centerpiece of their political theologies and ecclesiologies--a feature that such nineteenth-century European observers as Alexis de Tocqueville, Lord Acton, and Abraham Kuyper both celebrated and advocated among their co-religionists in Europe.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, many Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Methodists, and other Protestants joined with Catholics, Jews, and Enlightenment exponents to establish the core constitutional forms of federalism and separation of powers and to secure the constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, speech, assembly, and press, due process, and equal protection under the law. Many of these same Protestants later also worked to abolish slavery, to establish public schools, to reform laws of marriage and family life, to institute prohibition, temperance and other moral reforms, and to broaden the political franchise--though these reform movements permanently splintered Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and other denominations among more conservative and progressive factions. Some of these Protestant democratic reform efforts found new life in the social gospel movement led by Walter Rauschenbusch and his allies on both sides of the Atlantic in the early twentieth century. Protestant democratic theory found later theological champions in such luminaries as and H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr in America and Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Europe, and enjoyed intense rejuvenation and reformation in the immediate aftermaths of both World War I and World War II.

Today, most mainline Protestant churches in Europe have only a negligible effect on mainstream democratic politics--though Lutheran churches continue to have moral influence on public policy in Germany and Scandinavia, and several Anglican and Evangelical intellectuals have come to public and political prominence in England and Scotland. American Protestant influence on and in democracy is also somewhat diffuse and diluted, though pockets of intense intellectual and institutional strength remain in black churches, in various Reformed and Evangelical academic, human rights, and public policy groups, and in such political movements as the Christian Coalition.

While the political influence of mainline Protestantism waned in much of North America and Western Europe in the later twentieth century, it waxed in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe as well as in South Korea, Japan, and scattered pockets of the Indian subcontinent. Particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, Protestant mission churches had for decades served as zones of liberty during the harsh reigns of fascist, socialist, or colonial authorities. These churches were organized democratically like their American and European counterparts. They served as centers of poor relief, education, health care, and social welfare in the community. They catalyzed the formation of voluntary associations, and provided a sanctuary for political dissidents and a sanction for movements of democratic reform and renewal. They also leveled indigenous social hierarchies with their insistence on vernacularizing the Bible, on educating all persons for a vocation, and on relativizing all political authority to the authority of God. Protestant churches thereby provided models of democracy and bulwarks against autocracy in these long-trammeled societies, and have emerged as key leaders of the democratic movements now breaking out in these regions.

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